Research Influence on Public Policy: A Case Study

Changing water policy by degrees

A project initially ignored by government has become part of a paradigm shift

When Tunisia set its sights on averting an approaching water crisis, it concentrated overwhelmingly on increasing supply. An IDRC-supported research project with a focus on demand did little to change this. But the project seems to have contributed to a longer-term shift in outlook. Today, it also provides a reminder of the need to communicate technical findings in ways policymakers understand.

Tunisia is an economic success story – but excessive demands on the country's limited water supply may compromise that success.

With annual growth rates reaching as high as 5%, Tunisia saw its per capita income increase more than five-fold between 1960 and 1997. Meanwhile, the proportion of its population living below the poverty line dropped from 22% to 6.2% between 1975 and 1995.

Advances such as these have catapulted Tunisia out of the ranks of underdeveloped countries. Now considered an "emergent economy," three-quarters of Tunisia's population are classified as middle class. This positive economic portrait and generally equitable distribution of wealth have also helped Tunisia avoid the political instability that has plagued many other countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

One remarkable feature of Tunisia's accomplishments is that they have occurred despite a water shortage. With an annual water supply of 430 cubic metres per person, Tunisia is well below the World Bank's definition of a water-scarce country – that is, one with less than 1,000 cubic metres per person.

Now, there are clouds on the horizon. Agriculture and other sectors that have propelled Tunisia's growth have been developed with little regard to water efficiency, raising the prospect of a depletion of water stocks that could trigger a crisis. The government took aim at this problem in a policy paper released in 1990, but its solutions focused mainly on the costly process of developing new supplies. References to water conservation remained vague and unconnected to the government's broader strategy.

Expanding the equation

IDRC saw an opportunity to broaden the policy debate in Tunisia. Around the same time that Tunisia released its policy paper, the Centre began a research program on Water Demand Management (WDM) strategies – i.e., looking primarily at demand rather than supply.

Researchers believed that Tunisia clearly stood to benefit from this kind of approach. Since most of its new water supplies had been identified or developed, the potential for Tunisia to meet future demand by boosting supplies was limited. More promising were the avenues being opened up by researchers like Professor Mohammed Salah Matoussi of Tunis University, a rising academic star who was beginning to explore the roles that economic mechanisms (such as tariffs) could play in promoting water conservation.

In supporting Professor Matoussi's research, IDRC saw the potential for Tunisia to benefit both environmentally and economically. An IDRC study of the project (written by Tracy Tuplin, based on research by IDRC's Sarah Earl and Bryon Gillespie) recounts that: "The principal objective of the *WDM in Tunisia project* was to develop an integrated water demand management strategy in Tunisia that would result in more effective use of limited water resources, prevent rationing in the face of eventual shortage, and delay heavy infrastructure investments to increase supply."

IDRC also hoped that any success it achieved with WDM in Tunisia would serve as an example to other countries in the region.

An intention to influence policy

From the outset, the plan was to achieve those goals by directly influencing policymakers. Tuplin writes that, when the project's parameters were first defined, "significant time was spent on ... reviewing strategies to ensure the work would inform water policy in the region." It was clearly understood that there should be "more focus on policy implications rather than the development of economic models."

For a while, it appeared that the project would make its mark in Tunisia's policy-making arena. Partway through the project's lifespan, internal IDRC documents showed considerable enthusiasm for results such as the citation of the project's research in government reports and an apparently new interest by bureaucrats in issues like tariff systems. One report concluded that: "This has been a highly successful project that physically succeeded in drawing attention to the demand side of water management."

Yet entering the home stretch, much of the optimism faded. It became apparent that the primary result of the project would be the publication of academic papers, to which policy-makers paid little attention. What caused this dramatic shift? Years after the project ended, Earl and Gillespie's interviews with both project researchers and Tunisian officials shed some light on the matter.

The interviews reveal researchers' critical view of their counterparts in government – with government officials similarly disdainful of the researchers' approach. This state of mutual distrust conforms to theorist Nathan Caplan's "two communities" hypothesis, which holds that the research community and the bureaucracy are often separated by significant differences in behaviour, expectations, and perceptions.

One Ministry of Agriculture official acknowledges that such a cultural divide does exist in Tunisia. He suggests that the rift could be mended if there was more contact between the two groups at dissemination events, and if both sides modified their approaches. Academic researchers, he says, need to do a better job at summarizing their research (so that busy bureaucrats can read it) and should take on more applied research. Policymakers, on the other hand, should communicate more clearly the problems they need to have answered.

Indirect impacts on policy

Does the failure of the researchers to forge a direct link with policymakers mean that the project was a failure?

The way that events have unfolded since the project ended suggests that the likely answer is "no." Within Tunisia, water demand management has become a supporting plank in the government's water policy – one of three interlocking approaches to managing this critical resource. More broadly, the Water Demand Management Forum (WDMF) has moved the issue to centre stage, through conferences involving participants from eleven countries in the region. A cornerstone of WDM is the role of economic analysis and economic instruments in promoting conservation. While this approach is now widely accepted, it was new when Prof. Matoussi championed it in Tunisia in the early 1990s.

All this indicates that, in the longer term, the Tunisian researchers' ideas *did* filter into the policy-making sphere.

Evert Lindquist has examined the ability of research to influence policy through circuitous, indirect means. One of those means is *expanding policy capacities* – that is, facilitating the creation of knowledge or competence in individuals or organizations that can later be put to use in some other context.

The WDM in Tunisia project clearly created such an expansion of capacity by allowing Prof. Matoussi, a leading innovator in the application of economic theory to water management, to refine his approach and methods. The project also supported

a number of graduate students examining the same issues. Cumulatively, this support led to Prof. Matoussi's ideas having a sustained presence in the country and in the region. Writes Tuplin: "IDRC support to this project helped to create the first group in Tunisia with the capacity to analyze water issues from a quantitative economics perspective."

Lindquist also notes that research can have a longer-term influence over policy by *broadening policy horizons*. In other words, researchers can put new concepts into circulation that may stimulate policymakers to frame issues in different ways or engage in different types of debates. Again, there is evidence that *WDM in Tunisia* did this. As David Brooks, the IDRC project officer during the latter part of the project observed, its emphasis on water demand brought policymakers into contact with an approach that seemed radical at the time it was first raised.

Through their involvement in water networks, however, project participants were able to advance the idea that water demand is not a fixed factor (as it had been assumed) but a variable that would respond to economic pressures. Within Tunisia, team members have interacted with the National Society for Water Exploitation and Distribution (SONEDE), while regionally Prof. Matoussi has been active in the Water Demand Management Forum, which has made policy influence one of its major concerns.

Looking for direct links

But are these indirect influences on policy the best that researchers could have hoped for? Was it inevitable that *WDM in Tunisia* would fall short of its goal of directly influencing policymakers during the project's tenure?

Earl and Gillespie's post-mortem of the project provides some instructive ideas about how productive links between researchers and policymakers can be cultivated. Their findings indicate that this project's failure to reach policymakers in the short term was likely not because the task was too daunting, but rather because the right strategies were not followed.

There was, for example, no clear plan on how to communicate the research findings. Highly technical documents were not translated into popular language that would have made project results understandable to non-mathematicians. Although workshops were held, they were aimed primarily at academic audiences. Similarly, the researchers' papers were published in academic journals, some of which were not available in Tunisia. All this was compounded by restrictions on Internet access, which scuttled plans for a project website.

In turn, the failure to develop a communications plan appears to have deeper roots in the project's design. The team was dominated by specialists, and lacked a member specifically responsible for dealing with policymakers. Additionally, since researchers were offered minimal compensation, the ability to publish academic papers became a more important reward for their work. Translating their findings into policy-friendly language was not something the researchers saw as their role.

Tuplin writes that norms have changed since *WDM in Tunisia* was launched. Now, IDRC and its partners pay more attention to the policy and communications dimensions of projects. "Today," she suggests, "IDRC may look for 'policy entrepreneurs' or people able to advocate change and adept at reading the environment both inside and outside government."

Overall, what's become clear is that drawing out the policy implications of research and communicating them to the people who steer the ship of public policy are not things that will happen on their own. Rather, they are crucial tasks that must be planned and budgeted for from the outset of research projects.

Writes Tuplin: "Research alone, no matter how good, is not enough to draw policymakers' attention to important and relevant issues."

This brief is based on a case study by Tracy Tuplin.

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Some lessons

- There are long-term and short-term ways to influence policy. A research project that lacks a direct and immediate influence on policymakers may have an impact over the longer term. For example, research could contribute to expanding the capacity of policymakers to integrate new approaches and practices. It could also broaden the horizons of other researchers, so that they will be able to bring new knowledge to bear on the problems they are studying.
- A research team should include members who can express results in policy-friendly ways.
- Communication efforts should be planned and budgeted for — they will not happen on their own.
- Projects should provide researchers with incentives to focus on the policy implications of their research. It is important that researchers have a better understanding of the role they can play in the creation of sound public policy.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC's work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation_policy